

By Angel B. Pérez



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# Struggling Between Two Worlds:

## How College Affects Identity Construction

A few months ago, I was recruiting at a New England private school and a young Guyanese woman entered the classroom where I was set up to speak with students about my institution. Her smile was radiant and she immediately caught my eye. She was the first student of color I had seen since I had arrived. At first seeming a bit shy and confused, she eventually opened up to me. Her conversational approach was strikingly different from other students'. She was not hung up on questions about what it takes to get in—this young woman wanted to know about our institutional culture and her ability to fit in. As I answered her questions, I wondered what her story was. Who was this radiant woman, so different from the other young men and women I had met today at this elite and wealthy private school?

The other students left the room and, as she and I were left alone, a calm came over her. She said, "Now that we're alone, let me ask you the real questions." For 30 minutes she quizzed me about how she would fit in and make sense of her identity if she moved to the West Coast and joined our community. It turned out that this young, New York-raised woman of South American descent left home at the age of 13 to join the ranks of this elite private school through an opportunity program. She was grateful for the opportunity, but never realized how much the experience would affect her. As she began telling me her story, I knew we had a lot in common and I encouraged her to share her true concerns:

"Ever since I arrived at this school, I feel like I live in middle space. I don't belong here, in the world of the white, wealthy and elite, but when I go home, I don't belong there either. I know I'm lucky to be here and understand it's going to make a difference in my life,

but sometimes I wish I hadn't come here. At least I would fit in at home. Now when I go back, I find myself talking differently. I don't use the same language I use here in school—and I find myself changing my accent, my wording and even my walk just to fit into my neighborhood. I then come back to this school, and I straighten up. I walk taller, I speak in SAT terminology, and I use "like" and "as if" in every other sentence. Half the time I don't know if I'm a valley girl or a hood rat. I guess I'm neither. So then, what am I? I just don't know if I can take any more of this double life in college. I know my friends probably talk about me in both places—I'm not black enough at home, and not white enough in school. Actually, I'm not even black—I'm Guyanese, but I can't even begin to fight that battle right now. Who would've known that putting your life together can be such hard work?"

She was holding back her tears. As my own eyes watered, I told her to have a seat and I shared my own story.

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When I left for college about 14 years ago, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. I was fortunate enough to be admitted into strong liberal arts college in upstate New York through an opportunity program. Technically my application had been denied before I was considered for the program. I felt fortunate for the opportunity and took it immediately. I left the projects of the South Bronx where I had spent my teenage years.

I was excited to leave. No more shootouts. No more urine in the elevators in the morning and no more waiting in line during the summer for free cheese and peanut butter. No more looking at crack bottles on the stairwells on my way to school and no more dodging fights with the other kids. The part that most excited me was that I would never be assaulted again—like I had been twice, once at gunpoint and once at knifepoint, tragedies that left me bedridden for weeks. Even though I was happy to leave, I was leaving the only world I knew—my family, my culture and even my language—and to join a world I knew nothing about. Adolescents generally need to belong, and when that sense of belonging is taken away or deconstructed, the search to regain or redefine it can be painful, lonely and sometimes debilitating.

I left the South Bronx with the few clothes I owned and a prayer that my mother imparted. My family had no money, yet I was headed to an institution with a hefty \$33,000 a year price tag. I was one of approximately 30 students of color on the campus and certainly one of the poorest. I felt scared, alone and destined for failure. How was I going to survive in the world of the elite, wealthy and white? Arroz con habichuelas was not on the menu in the dining hall; salsa and merengue were not on the DJ's playlist during campus parties; and the Number 2 New York Subway line was suddenly replaced by BMW's, Audi's and Land Rovers. The gun-infested and gang-ridden

streets of my hood were now replaced with the lush wooded areas, small boutiques and five-star restaurants of upstate New York. I left the tall, dilapidated housing project where I laid my head to rest each night and entered the world of small “suite style” residence halls. I might as well have arrived in Asia—to me, this was another continent.

I had grown up in a poor neighborhood, but didn't have anything to compare it to. Now that I was in a wealthy environment, I realized how poor I was. I was crushed. For four years I struggled with creating an identity. At school I wasn't white enough, and at home, I was no longer a real Hispanic. “You talk funny,” my brother and friends would say when I came home. “Why you trying to be white?” kids

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would tease, when I returned from school. I turned down a ride home from my college roommate because I didn't want him to see where I really lived. I sat in formal scholarship dinners, staring at the people across the table, waiting to see what utensils they selected before I picked up mine. Simple things—like picking out unfamiliar food or turning down friends to go downtown to eat (secretly because I had

no money)—to larger—explaining to my friends why my parents weren't coming to my graduation (they didn't see the importance)—were a constant reminder that I lived in two worlds and didn't belong in either.

Realizing we had much in common, the young lady continued:

"I know I'm lucky to be here, but I also feel guilty because I left a lot of people behind. I wish my parents and friends could understand my world up here, but no matter how hard I try, they never will. My school pays for me to go on fancy ski trips and to dances, while my parents struggle to keep up a home. I spend time talking about philosophy, inquiry and intellect—a luxury my family will never have. You don't have time to think about a life of learning if you don't know how much longer you will be able to support your family. I find myself not telling them some of the things I've been exposed to for fear that they won't understand or will be jealous. I just don't understand why I get all this stuff and they don't. If you think about it, it's not fair." The tears streamed down her face.

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I admired this student for embarking on this journey at such a young age. I couldn't promise her that the struggle would end soon. In fact, this secondary school experience would only be the beginning, and her experiences in

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college would only force her to further question who she is, who she wants to become and how she will create a life that is representative of her juxtaposing realities. Most teenagers face issues of identity—it's a natural developmental stage—but the social and cultural divides that face low-income young men and women of color poorly prepares them to deal with a transition to an unfamiliar environment. The things majority students often take for granted—parental support, safety at home, stable income, strong economic resources, and the social and cultural capital that affords them the skills to survive in college is not something many first-generation students have.

At the end of the evening, as the young student walked me to my car, I turned to her and said:

"Just promise me a few things..."

Know that your identity is a conglomerate of all your collective experiences. That may mean "dropping it like it's hot" at a party in Guyana, attending a lecture by a prestigious visiting professor at your college, visiting your friends in the projects, or enjoying your college roommate's summer cottage in Cape Cod. Your heart will tell you who you are. Remain true to that and people will like you for it.

Keep an open mind about everything you do in college. Don't hesitate to do something because you feel it's not what "your people" do. There will be opportunities afforded to you that will make you uncomfortable. That's good. If you're always comfortable, you will never grow.

If you're wondering why you have been given an opportunity, don't. It's yours and you have to make the most of it. Then, reach back and pull someone behind you forward. Think of it as paying the rent for these unique life opportunities.

Finally, promise that it won't take you what it took me 30-plus years to learn—You don't have to apologize for your success. You've worked hard. You earned it. Now it's your responsibility to use it wisely."